

## January 06, 2006- 2005 YEAR OF PROGRESS; 2006 YEAR OF PROMISE

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As we look back on the progress made in 2005 and look forward to the economic promise 2006 holds for the state of West Virginia, we have many reasons to be optimistic.

Just last week, for example, we learned that, according to a study released by the Bureau of Business and Economic Research at West Virginia University, our state added 17,600 jobs between the third quarter of 2003 and the second quarter of 2005. These are very exciting numbers, especially when you consider that between 2000 and the first three quarters of 2003, 9,700 jobs were lost, not gained.

This same study also points out that our unemployment rate fell from 6 percent in 2003 to 5.3 percent in 2004, while per capita income rose to \$25,681 between 2001-2004, ending a nearly three-year job recession. The 3.4 percent annual increase in income was above the national price inflation rate of 2.2 percent, implying that the standard of living for West Virginia residents will increase. As the saying goes, the numbers don't lie. What we are doing in West Virginia is working. And as a result, our people are working too.

I am a firm believer that technology, tourism and transportation are the three keys (or 3Ts, if you will) to unlocking the door to economic opportunities in southern West Virginia and I know that development in these three important areas has contributed to these encouraging numbers. What's more, new projects under way give me reason to believe the upward economic swing will continue in 2006.

In the area of transportation, for example, Congress passed this year one of the most important pieces of domestic legislation of the last several years: the federal Transportation Bill. In that bill, West Virginia will receive \$404 million annually in federal investment to meet its transportation needs. Through the work of Senators Byrd and Rockefeller and myself, southern West Virginia will receive nearly \$184 million for specific, important transportation projects. This bill will be of tremendous benefit to all West Virginians.

Think of all the advantages to having a modern, fully accessible highway system in West Virginia! We can move people and goods more easily and efficiently. Local businesses prosper because they can get their products to consumers; consumers prosper because their goods are cheaper. Businesses outside the state are enticed to relocate here because of this, as well.

In addition, \$16 million has been awarded to Marshall University to expand on its good work on transportation research. This is in addition to another \$1 million Sen. Byrd was able to secure for Marshall to continue its research program on railroad engineering.

On the technology horizon, the people of southern West Virginia can look forward to the rewards of millions of dollars in federal investment for technology centers in Lewisburg, Hinton and Beckley, as well as Concord University, to promote technology growth and job creation in the area. This investment comes as we continue to help small businesses in southern West Virginia obtain access to broadband technology and of push for legislation that will ensure consumers have equal access to quality telecom and schools and libraries will continue to get Internet connectivity at affordable rates.

Our tourism industry will reap the rewards from a number of new projects as well. The Coal Heritage Area is continuing to grow and prosper and just last month I was able to help score a major victory for the advancement of West Virginia's tourism industry, securing \$1.2 million in federal funds for southern West Virginia projects.

The Beckley Exhibition Coal Mine, the most heavily visited coal heritage-themed tourist destination in West Virginia with more than 50,000 annually, will receive a \$650,000, which will allow the City of Beckley to continue its progress on developing this important cultural facility. This is in addition to \$1 million awarded \$1,000,000 through the Coal Heritage Highway Authority earlier this year.

Also, an amount of \$550,000 has been secured for the development of the Greenbrier Valley Welcome and Interpretive Center which will allow visitors an interface with the entire region via Greenbrier County's access to Interstate 64. The center, which will prominently display the rich history and culture of the Greenbrier Valley, will promote tourism all along the Greenbrier River watershed from the beginning of the river at Shaver's Fork in Durbin to Hinton, where the Greenbrier flows into the New River.

This regional project stands to increase visitorship across southern West Virginia and, in turn, provide a boon to the many small businesses and existing whitewater, skiing and sportsman attractions in the area.

These are just a few examples of the many successes for the "three Ts" this year. The progress we have made this year in cementing these cornerstones to economic prosperity in Southern West Virginia is exciting, but as we all know, there is still work to do. Our state's median income is still only 49th in the nation. It doesn't take a rocket scientist to see there's lots of room for improvement. Rest assured, I will do my part as your representative in Washington to ensure that 2006 lives up to its promise. I urge all of you to do the same.